

Workshop *Nonexistence*

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# Existence, Validity, and Ontological Dependence

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## 1. Overview

### The general approach

Pay close attention to how existence is conveyed in natural language and whether and how reference to nonexistent object may be possible.

Only then draw conclusions about the notion of existence itself and the ontology of nonexistent objects.

### The views

[1] ‘Nonexistent’ objects of various sorts play a role in semantics (and in the ontology of the mind).

[2] Nonexistent objects do not come for free, but require the introduction by mental or linguistic acts, which is reflected in the semantics of natural language.

[3] Nonexistent objects are ontologically dependent on such acts, either as abstract artifacts intentionally produced by such acts or as entities non-intentionally generated by such acts.

[4] Existence is divided into different modes of being, such as existence, occurrence, and validity, reflected in different existence predicates in natural language. But the predicate *exist* has particular ‘wider’ applications.

[5] Validity is one mode of being applicable to certain abstract artifacts (and a few other things). But validity and existence have different application conditions with (abstract) artifacts.

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## 2. Non-existent, intentional objects

Standard cases of non-existent objects

Objects of imagining, conceiving, thinking about, referring to, describing, mentioning, intending.

In natural language semantics

Nonexistent objects act as semantic values and are needed for the compositional semantics of sentences with intentional verbs (*imagine, conceive, think about, refer to, mention, intend*). But nonexistent objects do not come for free do: they depend on the description of a quasi-referential act in the sentence, or at least an implicit reference to such an act.

Not every non-referring description ‘generates’ a nonexistent object:

- (1) a. ?? The church in the village does not exist.
  - b. The church *mentioned* in the guide does not exist.
- (2) a. ?? There is a house that does not exist.
  - b. There is a house John *described* that does not exist.
- (3) a. ??? Mary talked to a man that does not exist.
  - b. Mary *described* a man that does not exist.

Intentional adjectives:

- (4) a. The *imagined* church does not exist.
  - b. The *described* man does not exist.

Implicit reference to a referential act in subject position: ok with implicit reference to a quasireferential chain:

- (5) a. ??? The blue apples in this room do not exist
  - b. The golden mountain / Pegasus does not exist.

Nonexistent objects as entities ‘generated by’ unsuccessful or pretend referential mental or linguistic acts (or states)

Quasi-referential acts

unsuccessful or pretend referential mental or linguistic acts

Nonexistent objects as entities *ontologically dependent* on quasi-referential acts or mental states. But that does not mean they are entities *caused* by quasi-referential acts

Like *abstract artifacts* in general, they involve ontological dependence as a generating relation, not a causal relation (Irmak 2021)

Nonexistent objects as entities generated by quasireferential acts

[1] *Intentional objects*: generated by unsuccessful referential acts:

Nonexistent, non-intended products, generated by unsuccessful acts of reference and associated property attributions

Compare the singleton set containing a musical work, the non-intended product generated by acts of musical composition

Refinement:

Intentional objects are generated by *coordinated* referential and predicational acts (mental or linguistic), in roughly the sense of coordination of Fine (2007).

This will be relevant for the semantics of anaphora in *intentional identity cases*.

Coordination of mental or linguistic acts (or states) may be indirect:

beliefs can be coordinated if they are directed toward a common source (Hob-Nob sentences)

[2] *Fictional characters*: ‘existent’ entities that are the intended products of pretend acts of reference

That is, ontological dependence may involve:

[1] Mental acts of referring with a description and of predication, attributing properties to what the description is meant to refer to

[2] Mental state of intending a fictional character.

Dependence on 1: intentional object

Dependence on 1 and 2: fictional character.

I.e. a piece of fiction about a single entity generates two nonexistent objects.

Linguistically reflected difference between the two sorts of entities

Application of existence predicates and other predicates conveying external properties

(6) a. The fictional character Hamlet / Hamlet exists.

b. Hamlet does not exist.

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### 3. Events

Events can easily have the status of abstract artifacts: plans, projects, organized future events

As such they permit the application of *exist*:

- (7) a. The plan exists.  
 b. the project already exists.  
 c. ? The planned demonstration exists.

*Existence* of an event as an abstract artifact is distinct from its *realization* !

Parallel to musical works:

Musical works as abstract artifact vs concrete performances.

*Exist* is the existence predicates for 'eventive' abstract artifacts, even though it is inapplicable to events.

Why? Abstract artifacts, being nowhere or everywhere, in a way are completely present throughout a time.

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### 4. Existence and modes of being

Existence predicates generally represent the way entities relate to space and time:

*Exist* vs. *happen* / *occur* / *take place*:

- (8) a. The demonstration existed / took place.  
 b. The rain still exists is still going on.  
 (9) a. For an entity *d* and a temporal or spatial location *t*, *exist*(*d*, *t*) iff *d* is *completely present* throughout *t*.  
 b. For a time *t*, *occur*(*d*, *t*) iff *d* extends over *t*

Type-independent application of *exist*

Applies to any nonexistent entities generated by quasi-referential acts:

- (10) a. (?) The war described in the book did exist.  
 b. (?) The earthquake he was referring to did not actually exist.

Other modes of being

*Present itself*, German *eintreten* 'enter':

Cases:

- (11) a. Der Fall, in dem ein Student das Examen bestanden hat, ist noch nie eingetreten.  
 b. The case in which a student passed the exam has never presented itself.

Cases are not events, but situation in the role of truthmakers within a space of alternatives.

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**5. Validity as a mode of being**

German *bestehen* 'obtain'

Attitudinal objects

- (12) a. Es besteht die Hoffnung, dass es regnen werde.  
 'There is the hope that it will rain.'  
 b. Die Hoffnung besteht, dass es regnen werde.  
 'The hope exists that it will rain.'

- (13) a. Es besteht die Annahme, dass S.  
 It obtains the assumption that S.  
 b. Die Annahme besteht, dass S.  
 The assumption obtains that S.

Modal objects

- (14) a. Die Moeglichkeit besteht, dass Hans gewaehlt wird.  
 'The possibility exists that John will be elected.'  
 b. Das Angebot besteht, die Villa zu mieten.  
 'The offer exists to rent the villa.'

Laws, habits, and rules

- (15) a. Das Gesetz besteht, dass S  
 'The law obtains that S.'  
 b. Hier besteht die Gewohnheit, dass man morgens Kaffee trinkt.  
 here obtains the habit that one drinks coffee in the morning

Validity as the mode of being conveyed by *obtain*.

*Is valid* and *obtain* in English:

- (16) a. Her claim is still valid.  
 b. The law is valid / obtains.  
 c. The offer / invitation is still valid.

*Obtain* and *bestehen* are applicable to other propositional objects:

Facts, states, states of affairs

Not all attitudinal objects can have validity (in the relevant sense)

Not result-like objects: judgments, conclusions

Not descriptive objects: remarks, observations

- (17) a. ?? The judgment is valid.  
 b. ?? Joe's remark is valid / obtains.

Only attitudinal and modal objects whose production involves a *declarative speech act*

Validity vs existence

Apparent equivalence

- (18) a. The law still exists.  
 b. The law still obtains  
 c. The law is still valid.

Why does *exist* apply to modal objects in the first place?

Modal objects are *completely present* throughout any time and any place at which they exist.

Statements of existence and validity are not always equivalent:

Existence concerns 'all' levels, not so validity:

- (19) a. John's thesis / claim is no longer valid. (locutionary act is still 'around')  
 b. ? John's thesis / claim no longer exists.

Different presuppositions when existence predicate is not time-relative

- (20) a. The rule that S is invalid.  
 b. The rule that S does not exist.  
 (20b) presupposes attempted act of reference to the rule, but not (20a).  
 (20a) presupposes production of the rule with unsuccessful declaration of its validity

(e.g. successful locutionary act, but illocutionary act)

Validity for artifacts that have a material base

Invitations:

- (21) a. The invitation was sent out.  
 b. The invitation is no longer valid.  
 c. ? The invitation no longer exists.

Coins, stamps

- (22) a. The coin is no longer valid.  
 b. ??? The coin no longer exist.  
 (23) a. The stamp is no longer valid.  
 b. ??? The stamp no longer exists.

Can there be coins and stamps with ongoing existence, but not validity?

Attitudinal objects:

A linguistic criterion: choice of tense

- (24) a. John's claim is that the problem is unsolvable.  
 b. John's claim was that the problem is unsolvable.  
 (25) a. John's claim is astonishing.  
 b. John's claim was astonishing.

(24a) and (25a) imply that the claim is still valid or endorsed, but not so (24b) and (25b).

What determines the lifespan of an abstract artifact?

Intended validity when applicable.

Otherwise intended existence?

But not all abstract artifacts have an intended validity or intended lifespan, rather they may be indeterminate in that respect.

Another criterion: being present in the mind of people or the relevant community?

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**6. Semantic type differences among existence predicates**

*Bestehen, obtain vs gueltig sein, be valid:*

Parallel to *exist vs be real, be existent*

(26) a. Beschraenkungen bestehen. (existential)

‘Restrictions obtain.

b. Beschraenkungen sind gueltig. (generic)

‘Restrictions are valid.’

(27) a. Giraffen existieren. (existential)

‘Giraffes exist.’

b. Giraffen sind reel / existent. (generic)

‘Giraffes are real / existent.’

(28) a. Such a law does not obtain. (existential)

b. Such a law is not valid. (generic)

(29) a. Such an animal does not exist. (existential)

b. Such an animal is not real / is not existent. (generic)

Stage-level / individual level distinction

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### Some References

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